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HUNGER FOR GOD

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FOURTH
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Scripture: Exodus 16:1-5, 13-18, Mark 6:30-44

"And all ate and were filled." Mark 6:42 (NRSV)

We do not live by bread alone. Neither do we live very long without it. There are about us and in us two hungers: hunger for bread and hunger for God. If we neglect them, either one, we diminish, shrivel, die. If we satisfy them, if we feed them, we live, grow, become.

> The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done, and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. [Mark 6:30-44]

He was born in Bethlehem; grew to manhood in Nazareth and around the age of thirty he came into the district of Galilee proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is present in the life of the world and inviting people to live in a new way, to live as if God were actually in charge of the world.

He left no writing behind. He had no biographers. Those who wrote about him did so a full generation, and more, after his life, and then they were far more interested in his message than personal details.

One thing about the story seems beyond argument; the clear fact of history, that when he came into Galilee there was an immediate and strong response among the peasants and almost immediately a response by the authorities in Jerusalem.

The people of Galilee listened to him. They dropped what they were doing and followed him, and the world has never been the same.

Who were they — these faceless, nameless people in the crowd following Jesus?

Actually we know a lot about them. They were the poor people, the ones on the margin, disenfranchised, unimportant; and the sinners, all those nondescript men and women scratching for a living, trying to survive, with neither the time, inclination or wherewithal to pay attention to social niceties and who had never in their lives been inside a Synagogue. And tax collectors — those despicable characters who made their living working for the Romans and who profited by overcharging their own neighbors. And the untouchables, those who had the dreaded skin disease and who by religious and civil law were banished from the community and who, along with the deranged, and mentally ill, lived outside the towns, like wild animals. And the lame, the blind, the sick, hobbling on crutches and canes and walking sticks, led by their families, and the old ones, carried on the backs of their strong sons, or on pallets. And women and children whose roles in the world of the first century were rigidly defined. Women were property; children were expendable.

Professor John Dominic Crossan, in his book on Jesus, says that he proclaimed a Kingdom of "Nuisances and Nobodies," and that is who responded. People in that crowd had long ago concluded that they mattered not at all to anyone. [*Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography,* p. 54]

It was a crowd unlike anyone had seen before. It was unsettling, to say the least — children, tax collectors, riff-raff, women, sick, blind, lepers. If you're a city hall politician in Jerusalem, even the rumor of a crowd like that gets your attention. There were a lot of them, perhaps several thousand one time on occasion, each one of the writers remembers.

It was late in the day. He had sent his disciples out, two by two, to go to the Galilean towns, teaching and healing. It was their first experience with that sort of thing. The day they all remembered was the appointed day of their return from their mission. As they began to gather, tired from walking, exhausted from their experience, hungry, they were eager to talk with one another and with him about what they had done and how it had gone. You've done that, returned from an important business trip, or some adventure into some new uncharted territory for you, and returned home wanting and needing nothing more than to talk about it with someone.

And so Jesus suggests that they take the night off, find a quiet place where they can have a good meal, some conversation afterward and then a good night's sleep. They climb in the boat and, with the setting sun behind them, make for the other shore of the lake. But the crowd, persistent, insistent, noisy, sees them leaving. The word spreads and the crowd begins to move and by the time the little boat reaches its destination a few miles up the shoreline, it isn't a quiet spot at all. The crowd is already there, only now it's even larger.

When he saw what was happening, Jesus changed the agenda. He had compassion for the crowd and spoke to them and mingled with them, and taught them, and listened to them. And my favorite part of this story is the disciple's wondering what happened to happy hour and dinner and that good night's sleep they were finally going to get. I'm with them. "Uh, Jesus," they say, "this is the quiet place, isn't it? Remember us, your friends — the meal — the nice evening together? It's getting late. How about we send them away now. They're getting hungry too and if they don't get a move on, the grocery stores are going to be closed."

A testy exchange follows:

Disciples: "Send them away."

Jesus: "You give them something to eat."

Disciples: "We don't have enough money to buy bread for everybody."

Jesus: "What *do* you have?"

Disciples: "Someone came up with five loaves of bread and two fish."

Jesus: "Sit them down!"

And then, who knows what happened or how it happened. He blessed the bread. He prayed. He broke the bread and cut the fish. Everybody ate. Everybody had enough to eat and there was plenty left over for the disciples. Some think that his example of compassion inspired the crowd and that anyone who had brought food along shared it and there was enough for all. And some think that a thoughtful soul had purchased enough for everyone and at the right moment brought out the food. And some, most of us I sense, don't know how it happened or what happened, except that the ones who recalled it later agree that everybody was hungry and everybody was fed with bread but with something else as well, something equally important; something about a new kingdom which for them meant a new way to live life in this world; a new notion of what it means to be God's people; a new idea of a human community in which all are welcome and none are excluded because they are the wrong race, or have a frightening disease; a new way of being in which all the old rules that kept

women out of sight and discarded unwanted children, and banished the sick and lame and blind, all that was gone and in its place they experienced that evening what Professor Crossan called a "radical egalitarianism." None of those people in that crowd, he says, had ever been served by anyone other than their wives or daughters. Five thousand men, Mark remembers, and here is Jesus and his disciples acting like servants, like women - as if somehow it didn't matter, as if in the eyes of God everyone was equally important. And while it scared Jerusalem and Rome to death, it seemed to them like a breath of fresh air, like water on a dry tongue, like a chunk of good brown bread when you think you're dying of hunger.

Douglas John Hall is Professor of Theology at McGill University in Montreal and one of the very important Christian thinkers of our day. Recently Professor Hall was invited to prepare a paper for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It's a strong and challenging paper. In it Hall suggests that as this tumultuous century comes to an end a new millennium dawns and North Americans are involved in four quests. The quest for:

- Moral Authenticity
- Community
- Transcendence and Mystery
- Meaning

Values — Community — Transcendence — Meaning.

Spiritual hunger? Hunger for God perhaps?

For the better part of a century we've tried to suppress it, deny, pretend it wasn't there. Early Marxist ideology taught that it simply goes away once people are free not to be religious. And when that didn't work Communist dictatorship simply crushed it: executed and jailed the priests, turned churches into concert halls, scorned it, laughed at it, and insofar as the rest of the world wasn't watching, persecuted it. It didn't work. There are forty-five million Christians in China, and as soon as they came out of hiding a few years ago, the government started to back away from its new openness and it appears that a new era of oppression has begun.

In last Sunday's *New York Times*, a Russian composer, Sofia Gubardulina, spoke of her faith and her art. Ordered to write joyful music which served the state, she refused and was blacklisted. Performance of her work was forbidden in the 1970s because of their spiritual content.

> "I can't think of any way to explain the existence of art," she told the *Times*, "other than as a means to express something greater than ourselves. I can't reach a single musical decision except with the goal of making a connection to God."

In the secular sixties we thought God was dead and that belief was neurosis and faith a delusion. But last week the paper reported that the new *American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic Manual* has "moved away from an earlier tendency to treat religion as a delusion or as evidence of immature escapism or neurosis." We've come a long way!

And a new book which includes exhaustive interviews with young adults about questions of values, belief and faith, reveals that among what we call the "Baby Boomer Generation," spirituality is alive and well. The biggest single category of "Boomers" regard themselves as "basically religious." [*Vanishing Boundaries*, Huge, Johnson, Luidens]

There are two hungers in us: a hunger for bread and a hunger for God. Sometimes we need to be convinced that our hunger for God is real.

In a recent editorial in *The Door*, Mike Yaconelli, wrote that the trouble with religion is that "it talks too much about 'commitment' and not enough about 'hunger.'"

> If I am committed, then I am consistent, regular, disciplined, strong-willed. Heck, this doesn't sound like Christianity, it sounds like a diet.

The word he wants to hear more of is "hunger." As a religious word, "hunger," he says, makes his soul tingle.

> "Faith isn't so much a discipline as a hunger. I've been hungry for God from the beginning." He was told his longing for God was irrelevant. What was relevant was commitment. But now he knows the truth — that hunger for God is a gift, a sign of the Holy Spirit, an assurance that God is alive in your heart. [see Martin Marty, *Context*, 2/2/94]

St. Augustine wrote a beautiful truth in the opening of his *Confessions*.

> Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.

And my theological mentor, Professor Joseph Sittler, University of Chicago, put it in a way I remember a lot.

> Hunger, unabated, is a kind of testimony to the reality of food. To want to have may become a strange kind of having. [*Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, p. 56]

There are two hungers in us. Trust your hunger for God as much as you trust your hunger for food. And before you start thinking about and worrying about what you are doing or not doing to fulfill your commitment — simply be hungry, and put yourself in that crowd and allow Jesus Christ to serve you — to break life-giving bread and feed you. . . with the assurance that no matter what you think of yourself and the meaning of your life — your life is precious to God . . . with the promises that God's gracious love extends to you, touches you even when you feel yourself to be untouchable, loves you even when you are unlovable, forgives you even when you think you are unforgivable. You are invited into a new community where all are welcome and where all know the good news that there is nothing in creation, nothing that can ever happen to you that will separate you from God's holy love.

We need that as much as we need bread. We need to know that we matter, that God's love for us seeks us, finds us, welcomes us and will never let us go.

There is a wonderful short story by the late Raymond Carver, *A Small, Good Thing*. It is about the intense, almost life-threatening hunger we experience in the extremes, when we must face suffering, and loss and death.

It is in Robert Altman's film, "Short Cuts," although some reviewers, including Robert Coles, think Altman didn't get Carver's point. I'd like to try to tell it to you.

A couple in their early thirties are preparing to celebrate the tenth birthday of their son, Scotty. His mother has ordered a birthday cake, and negotiated the decorations, the price and the exact day and time she will pick it up, with a gruff, unpleasant baker. On his birthday Scotty is hit by a car, later collapses, is rushed to the hospital and as he lapses into unconsciousness, every parent's nightmare begins. Doctors, at first confident, become concerned. When the father goes home in the evening to feed the dog the phone rings.

> "There's a cake here that wasn't picked up," the voice says.
>
> "I don't know anything about a cake."
> "Don't hand me that" the voice says, and the man hangs up.

The doctors continue to assure them that Scotty will by okay by morning but seem worried now. The couple begins to pray for their son. They wait all the next day but Scotty doesn't wake up. On the evening of the second day, his mother goes home to take a bath and rest. The phone rings.

"Mrs. Weiss?" the voice asks.

"This is Mrs. Weiss. What is it please. Is it Scotty?"

"Scotty," the man's voice said. "It's about Scotty. Have you forgotten Scotty?" the man said. Then he hung up.

Scotty continues to decline slowly. His unconsciousness is now a coma, and then incredibly, he dies in their arms just before surgery . . . a "hidden occlusion, one-in-a million."

Devastated, confused, stunned, numb, they return to their home. The phone rings.

"Who is this?" she demands.

"Your Scotty, I got him ready for you."

And then she remembers the cake. The baker. In a blind rage, fueled by grief they drive to the bakery, pound on the door and a terrible, profane encounter ensues — which almost becomes violent. Finally she manages to get it out. "My son is dead." And then her rage disappears and she begins to cry and the baker realizes what has occurred and what he has done and then the most wonderful thing happens — something not unlike whatever it was that happened near the shore of the Sea of Galilee as the sun was setting, long ago.

The baker put the rolling pin back on the counter. He undid his apron. He looked at them, and then he shook his head slowly. He pulled a chair out from under the card table that held papers and receipts, an adding machine, and telephone directory. "Please sit down," he said. "Let me get you a chair," he said to Howard. "Please sit down, you people."

Ann wiped her eyes and looked at the baker. "I wanted to kill you," she said. "I wanted you dead."

"Let me say how sorry I am," the baker said, putting his elbows on the table. "God alone knows how sorry. Listen to me. I'm sorry for your son, and sorry for my part in this," the baker said. He spread his hands out on the table and turned them over to reveal his palms. "I don't have any children myself, so I can only imagine what you must be feeling. All I can say to you now is that I'm sorry. Forgive me if you can."

The baker looked at them for a minute and then nodded and got up from the table. He went to the oven and turned off some switches. He found cups and poured coffee from an electric coffee-maker. He put a carton of cream on the table, and a bowl of sugar.

"You probably need to eat something," the baker said. "I hope you'll eat some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this," he said.

He served them warm cinnamon rolls just out of the oven, the icing still runny. He put butter on the table and knives to spread the butter. Then the baker sat down at the table with them. "It's good to eat something," he said, watching them. "There's more. Eat up. Eat all you want. There's all the rolls in the world in here."
They ate rolls and drank coffee. Ann was suddenly hungry, and the rolls were warm and sweet. She ate three of them, which pleased the baker. Then he began to talk. They listened

carefully. Although they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say. They nodded when the baker began to speak of loneliness, and of the sense of doubt and limitation that had come to him in his middle years. He told them what it was like to be childless all these years.

"Smell this," the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. "It's a heavy bread, but rich." They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.
[*Where I'm Calling From: A Small Good Thing*, p. 87/88]

Jesus, taking the five loaves and the two fish, looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people. And all ate and were filled.

There are two hungers in us. And there is bread . . . Bread of Life. Thanks be to God.

Amen.